MAGAZINE OF THE FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS

AMERICAN FILM

VOLUME XII NUMBER 1 OCTOBER 1986

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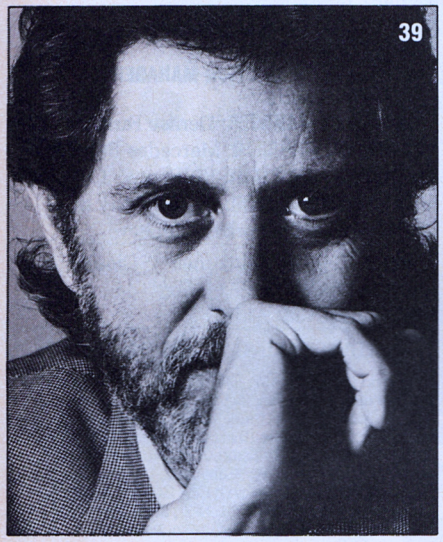

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Cover: *Tough Guys'* Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster. Photograph by Steve Schapiro/Gamma-Liaison. Courtesy of Touchstone Films.

American Film is owned by The American Film Institute, an independent, nonprofit organization serving the public interest, established in 1967 by the National Endowment for the Arts to advance the art of film and television in the United States. The institute preserves films, operates an advanced conservatory for filmmakers, gives assistance to new American filmmakers through grants and internships, provides guidance to film teachers and educators, publishes film books, periodicals, and reference works, supports basic research, and operates a national film repertory exhibition program.

THE EDITING ROOM

One of the most interesting recent developments in movieland, as I mentioned in my column last month, is the appointment of David Puttnam as chairman and CEO of Columbia Pictures. Puttnam says his strategy is to make Columbia into a studio that specializes in the kind of films he's used to making, which distinguishes him from the last wave of idealists—the so-called baby moguls—who financed the films closest to their hearts, like *Missing* (at Universal), with blockbusters that presumably were closest to the hearts of their stockholders. If Puttnam does what he says he's going to do, and succeeds, he may well revolutionize commercial filmmaking in America, proving once and for all that audience "demand" is a two-way street, that given the opportunity, audiences will reject lowest-common-denominator junk in exchange for quality fare. The likelihood is, of course, that although the general principle may be true, it will be impossible to prove.

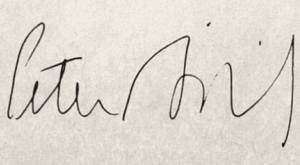
Puttnam comes to Columbia with an acute sense of the burdens of power. He likes to tell about a trip to Hollywood he made some years ago as a young producer, at the nadir of which he ended up in tears, sitting on the bed in his hotel room, unable either to afford to stay longer or return to London empty-handed. He recently told a group of producers at a conference sponsored by the Sundance Institute that "it would be very nice to have a photograph of myself on that small bed in that equally small hotel room by the telephone weeping. I would put it over my desk, because it would allow me to deal rather better with many of the issues that I will be forced to deal with over the next three years.

"The tragedy of power is that it brings with it amnesia; you slice out of your memory the moments in your life that have been agonizing, the moments in your life which should create empathy with people who are going through a similar agony. Power offers the opportunity to take shortcuts in both personal and business relationships. Those shortcuts are often inhumane or, in a more general sense, antihumanist and, therefore, anticultural. As soon as you start exercising power, taking shortcuts, you're diminishing the very qualities that allowed you the privilege of power in the first place, and the cultural values on which you based your better judgments.

"The motion picture industry has traditionally been fear based. This creates a unique mix of insecurity and arrogance, which, in turn, creates a special form of paranoia. Paranoia is not a useful personal trait if you're making creative decisions or dealing with creative people who are insecure to begin with. Paranoia, both yours and theirs, is likely to end up being the most powerful element in a relationship, when in fact it shouldn't be an element at all."

American culture looks different from the vantage point of Europe than it does from here, and it's not hard to see the attraction of working in Hollywood for a man like Puttnam, despite his reservations about the way the industry works. Andrzej Wajda, in a recent interview Puttnam called to our attention, says that European directors have lost both their audience and their voice, and praises Hollywood because its films still have both: mass appeal, and a certain kind of lunatic honesty conferred, paradoxically, by their no-expense-spared profligacy.

Precisely because the outcome of the Puttnam experiment is so important to the future of American film, we tracked him down in the hectic weeks before he started work, and asked him to sit for an interview with our London editor and head of BFI production, Colin MacCabe. We are pleased to publish the results.



AMERICAN FILM

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American Film: Magazine of the Film and Television Arts (ISSN-0361-4751) is published monthly, except combined for January-February and July-August, as a joint venture by The American Film Institute and the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities. Signed articles herein do not necessarily reflect the official American Film Institute policy.

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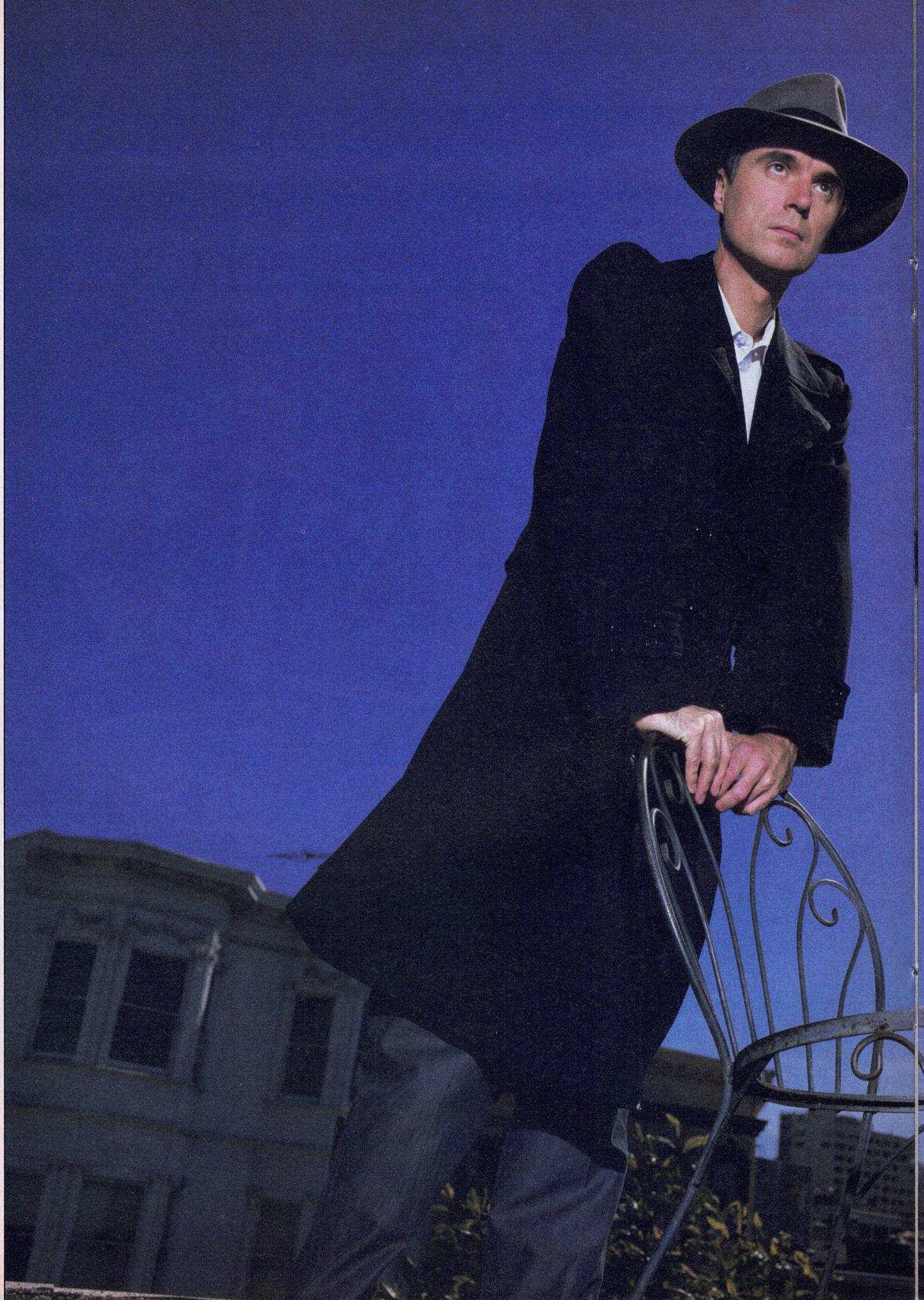
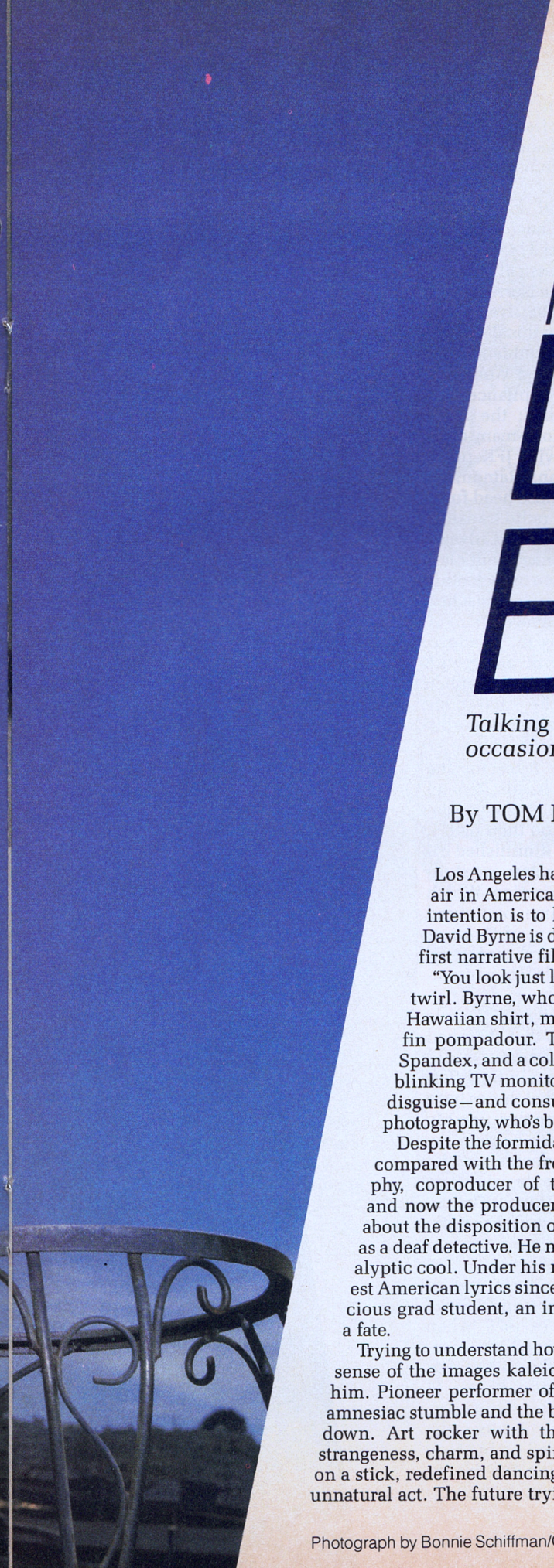




MAKING SENSE OF DAVID BYRNE

Talking Head analyzed on the occasion of his directing debut.

By TOM McDONOUGH

Los Angeles has been soggy for three days: an invasion of Mexican air in American February. The rain, propelled by a wind whose intention is to knock things down, trickles into the stage where David Byrne is directing a rock video on the set of *True Stories*, his first narrative film.

"You look just like a director, David," says Tina, twirling a starlet twirl. Byrne, who also acts in the video, is wearing a high-voltage Hawaiian shirt, mustard yellow suit, pencil mustache, and shark-fin pompadour. Tina, tarted up in stiletto heels, leopard-skin Spandex, and a colossal hair bow, struts her stuff in front of fifteen blinking TV monitors. Byrne chuckles—he looks quite natural in disguise—and consults quietly with Ed Lachman, the director of photography, who's been scanning the set with "what's next?" eyes.

Despite the formidably eccentric fashions, the scene feels tame compared with the frenzy one expects of rock video. Karen Murphy, coproducer of the sublimely goofy *This Is Spinal Tap* and now the producer of *True Stories*, checks with her director about the disposition of certain publicity photos. He stares, alert as a deaf detective. He nods mildly. One was expecting post-apocalyptic cool. Under his makeup, the author of some of the quirkiest American lyrics since Emily Dickinson has the face of a precocious grad student, an innocent face in the process of acquiring a fate.

Trying to understand how Byrne works is as daunting as making sense of the images kaleidoscoping on the TV monitors behind him. Pioneer performer of minimalist catatonia. Maestro of the amnesiac stumble and the baroquely embellished nervous breakdown. Art rocker with the properties of the elusive quark: strangeness, charm, and spin. The man who, jerking like a glove on a stick, redefined dancing as hopping and performance as an unnatural act. The future trying awkwardly to happen.

Photograph by Bonnie Schiffman/Onyx

Stop Making Sense, Jonathan Demme's 1984 film of the Talking Heads in performance, created the sport of Byrne-watching. The fascination was of watching a hostage ecstatically plot his escape—of watching a man change his tempo, change his clothes, change his body, change his mind.

Today, amid the routine looniness of a film set, costumed like an outtake from "Miami Vice," David Byrne happens to be an executive, very much the man with a plan. He turns to Chris, a burly actor decked out like a spangled hybrid of Sophie Tucker and a badly eroded Elvis. Chris rehearses to the track of "Wild Wild Life," a Byrne composition. His task is to spasm heavy-metalishly. The sound man cranks up the volume, smothering the thunder outside. Thumpity-*THUMP!*

Life makes little sense, rock video says, but there's always dancing. There is lots of dancing, the movies agree, and in the end there is some sense, maybe even justice, and money. David Byrne, who looked a few short years ago like an anorectic recently rescued from utter weightlessness, is currently living in the movies.

"Nice, Chris," he says softly. "Only can you snarl some more?" Thumpity-*THUMP!*

☆ ☆ ☆

Everyone is looking for America. Bruce Springsteen, Steven Spielberg, Elvis Costello, Albert Brooks, Lily Tomlin, Sylvester Stallone, Lee Iacocca, Willie Nelson, Pee-wee Herman, John Cougar Mellencamp, Jackson Browne—everybody's doing it. Even Rubén Blades, the Panamanian salsa king, is *buscando America*.

It may simply be the kind of quest that naturally occurs toward the end of a century, when we get an urge to add things up. In any case, the implication is that we've lost it—our identity, our direction. Where has it all gone—to the Jersey shore? Back to the farm? No, no, that was last year, wasn't it?

Of all the contemporary questers for the national soul, David Byrne is one of the cleverest. Certainly his means are the most varied. For those of us who may not be too adept at connecting the dots to the zeitgeist, he has simultaneously created, along with his film, a sound track album and sundry videos as well as a book composed of the film's script, storyboard sketches, location photographs, and whimsical comments concerning fashion, architecture, frontier history, the semiology of twins, the sociology of shopping malls, the poetic aspirations of computer hackers, and the real reason for the disappearance of dinosaurs.

"Empires in retreat get into some pretty weird stuff," Byrne writes in the introduction to *True Stories*, the book. "Some of us might have seen the tail end of the heyday, but now most of us can feel reality settling in."

Byrne, who's exhibited some pretty weird stuff himself, may have glimpsed the reality of postimperial America in Texas. *True Stories* is a musical morality play starring Byrne as the Narrator who witnesses and joins in the lives of the citizens of Virgil, a mythical prairie town. The players are as emblematic as they are bizarre: the Laziest Woman in the World, so hooked on appliances that she never gets out of bed; the Lying Woman, who claims, among many other things, that her affair with JFK precipitated his assassination; Ramon, an assembly-line worker whose head functions as an extrasensory radio transmitter and receiver; Kay and Earl Culver, a successfully married management-class couple who haven't spoken to each other in several years; a paranoid Preacher; and Louis Fyne, a middle-aged "single" who advertises raucously for true love. The story, written by Byrne along with playwrights Beth Henley and Stephen Tobolowsky, follows the characters through a series of tableaux to their bittersweet fates.

Though Byrne chose Texas for the epic potential of its landscape ("It's an existential landscape. Stick some people out there, they're all on their own"), *True Stories* is an epic of diminished expectations, and the characters are studies in emotional miniaturization. Which is not to say that their drama, prefigured by the numb-nuts antihero of *Stranger Than Paradise* and any number of sensitive but shriveled souls in contemporary fiction, is trivial.

"It's a quiet time," says Byrne. "People don't have the optimism that they had earlier, that whole new vistas could open up and the world could be different. There's a sense now that things have settled; things are the way they are. My feeling is that epic events happen because of the way people decide to order their daily existence. The decisions are made about really small things. The cumulative effect of all that stuff makes big things happen."

☆ ☆ ☆

Cunning coincidence: The curve of Byrne's career parallels the popularity of the personal computer. In 1975, when Texas Instruments initiated an electronics boom with the four-bit microchip, when digitalization began to change the way we tell time, play games, cook food, and keep track of things, the Talking Heads materialized on the New York art-rock scene doing the binary boogie: on/off, up/down, right/left,

Every Picture Tells a (True) Story

Many of David Byrne's ideas for True Stories *came from tabloid newspaper articles he started collecting during the* Stop Making Sense *tour.*

Weekly World News:
"Loving Couple Hasn't Spoken For 31 Years!"
"March 13, 1984. The Rolfes, who married in 1949, have lived under the same roof, slept in the same bed and raised two normal, well-adjusted children, all without uttering a single word between them since 1953. . . ."

Interior, Dining Room — (Night)
The Civic Leader, EARL, *and his wife,* KAY. *A fairly well-to-do family. The son* (LARRY) *is about thirteen, and the daughter* (LINDA) *is a little older. The* NARRATOR *is joining them as they sit down to dinner.*

KAY Amen.
(They all raise their heads and unfold their napkins.)

NARRATOR This looks wonderful, Mrs. Culver.

KAY Thank you.

EARL Oh, look . . . Pigs in a blanket.

KAY Linda, will you ask your father to pass this to our guest?
(They pass the plate along.)

CIVIC LEADER Linda, will you ask your mother to pass the mustard?

LINDA Mom, Dad wants some mustard.
She passes it over. The table is arranged with one main course, a lobster, which is surrounded by vegetables, some plates of condiments, and various side dishes on a nearby lazy Susan.

CIVIC LEADER Linda, will you ask your mom how the Fashion Show went today?

LINDA Sure, Dad . . . *(turns to her mother)* . . . Mom, how'd it go today? . . .

KAY Well, Linda, you tell him it was just wonderful . . . although one woman did have an accident, but it wasn't serious. He should have been there . . . he would have been proud of me.

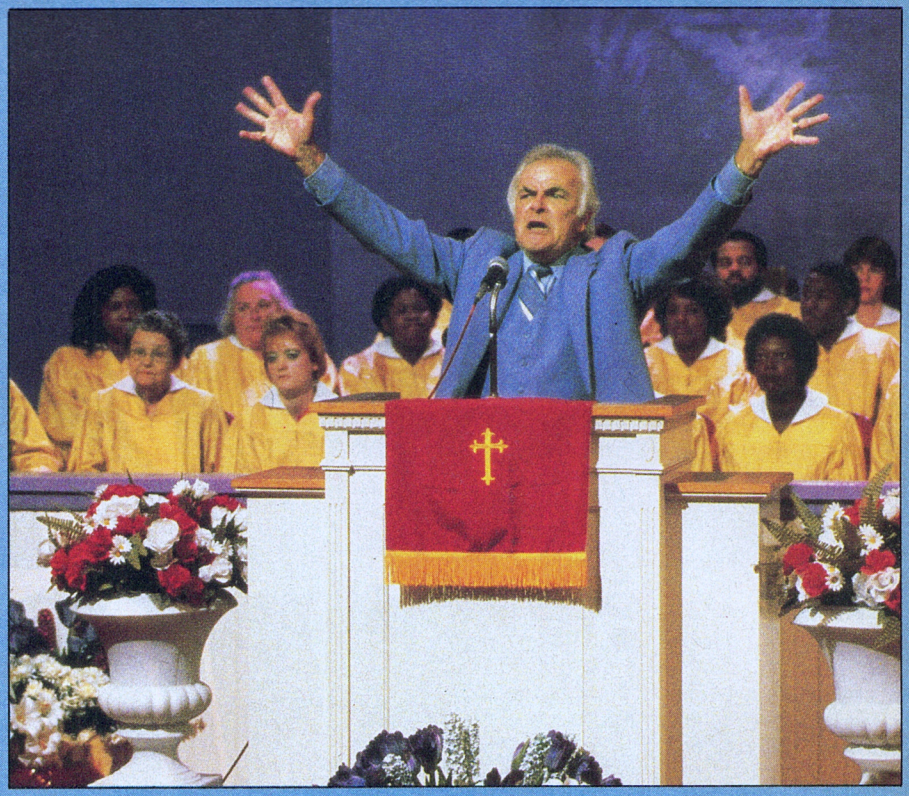
Interior, Fellowship Hall — (Day)
There is a podium front and center . . . a "PREACHER" *addresses the* CONGREGATION. *Behind him sits a* CHOIR *and to his left are a number of* MUSICIANS, *among them* RAMON, *who is seated at a keyboard instrument.*
The Speaker is dressed in a conservative suit, capped by an enormous shock of pure white hair.

PREACHER It thrills me! It thrills me! We can build a nation inside a nation right where we are! The choice is yours. I'm not a joiner. I'm not a member of the John Birch Society or the Communist Party.
We see LOUIS FYNE *in the audience. In another section we see* EARL, *the Civic Leader, and his wife,* KAY.

PREACHER Let's look at what's happened to the national morals since WW II.
The Preacher motions to a screen which has been set up above the choir.

PREACHER We lost the Vietnam war . . .
An image of LBJ *appears on the screen . . . and is replaced by one of* NIXON.

PREACHER The movies and television are filled with characters I don't even wanna know! Not in this life!
On another corner of the screen appear images of JOAN COLLINS . . . J.R . . . MR. T . . . *the guys from* "CHIP's" *and an* MTV V.J.



Photographs by Mark Lipson

Mark Lipson

VOICE OF M.C. Yes, it sure is . . . you can be sure of that, Bob. *Ho!* It's Grand Marshal Earl Culver and his family . . . *Thank you Earl!* . . . from all of us . . . and thanks to Anderson autos for the loan of the car . . . a real beauty.

We see the Culvers in the parade waving to the Crowd a little and smiling from a huge white convertible. They are all sitting on the top of the back seat . . . Earl and Kay on either side, and the kids in the middle. Earl says something to his son, who relays it to his mother, who responds to her daughter, who gives the answer to her dad.

On the sidelines, the Lying Woman speaks out to no one in particular.

LYING WOMAN Such a charming man. Few people know he's got a bull tattooed on his stomach.

The Cute Woman turns to her in amazement.

CUTE WOMAN Excuse me, honey, Earl Culver? They look so nice! . . . it reminds me of that song "Welcome to My World" . . . Do you know it?

LYING WOMAN Know it? Honey, I wrote it!

From *True Stories* by David Byrne. © True Stories Ventures, Inc., 1986. Reprinted by arrangement with Penguin Books, Viking Penguin Inc.

see/don't see, sound/silence.

The shock of Byrne's no-frills rock and the generally flustered reaction to the reductionist world of bits and bytes passed. America's artists and entrepreneurs began playing with the New. Home computers evolved into good citizens, in step with pop music, movies, and cars (Byrne drives an old Peugeot). They became user-friendly ways of confronting the technology—as opposed, presumably, to user-hostile ways like high school, terrorism, and the fiction of Don DeLillo.

But even if technology is a nice place to visit, most of us wouldn't want to live there. Unless it's happening at Russian Hill Recording Studios, where, in the trouty coolness of San Francisco's early summer, David Byrne is putting the finishing touches on *True Stories*.

Karen Murphy is doing what producers mostly do: talking on the phone. "I appreciate what you're saying, but I don't think it's the disaster you think it is," she assures a crisis-ridden caller. She strums the touch-tone buttons, smiles firmly, and resumes her stillness.

With her is an emphatic young man named Leslie Shatz, the sound designer of *True Stories*. A cloud shifts; a skylight brightens the surgical pallor of his studio. On the desk lies a sort of keyboard, apparently disembodied, bearing a decal: *The Important Thing Is to Express Yourself.* Leslie turns dials and pushes buttons with the serenity of man greeting his pets. One quickly loses track of how many times he says "instantaneously."

"I'm working with an Emulator. The DX-7, this other machine, is a synthesizer. I've been experimenting with it, making musical kind of sound effects on it. With this technology we can *design* sounds from scratch, make *archetypal* sounds. Listen!"

Finches are chorusing brightly outside, just above the skylight. Leslie slips a minifloppy labeled "Sound Design" into the Fat Mac computer next to his synthesizer. He keys a high frequency tone—*beep*—and instructs it to appear on the Fat Mac's monitor as a blotty-looking squiggle. A few clicks of the Mac's mouse, a stroke of the keyboard, and the tone flutters: *chee-EEP.* Outside, the finches continue to twitter, though more quietly now, as if to say: "Very amusing, Leslie, but . . ."

"The only problem," he sighs, "is human synapse burnout. There are just so many decisions your brain can make in a day."

On the keyboard, he arpeggios the frequency into a more finchlike warble. Again. Faster arpeggios. The finches—the real finches—recognize the synthetic serenade and reply with delight.

Karen talks to the intercom. "Doctor Byrne?"

Continued on page 38

DAVID BYRNE

from page 34

The Doctor is next door laying down tracks. In the dimness of the mixing studio—churchy or techy, it's hard to say—Byrne removes his trademark shirt-pocket pens and aligns them on a legal pad next to his Nikon. He strums the changes for what sounds like a country-western love ballad. He becomes fluid as soon as he starts to play, neck thrusting, head bobbing like a pigeon strolling in slow motion.

It *is* a C&W ballad, but the love object in this case happens to be a glass-and-steel office building prominent in *True Stories*. One was expecting an electrocuted rendition of Lullaby of Nerdland. But this is not just another smart white boy wit' dem ol' libidinal cathexis blues. Byrne likes to put a spin on things. With Byrne, the staples of popular music—orgasm and nostalgia—become side issues. He is not about tumescence or tantrums. He is about observation and comment.

"I stay away from loaded subjects," Byrne says *faux* naively. "I deal with stuff that's too dumb for people to have bothered to formulate opinions on."

☆ ☆ ☆

For the past few years, the School of Spielberg and its branch campus, MTV, have been posing the Big Question (big, that is, for the generation to whom World War II is a grainy newsreel and World War III a video game): *Is the new world— i.e., technology—malignant or benign?*

The Spielbergian answer is at once ingenious, scary, reassuring, and cute: Even Suburbia Has a Subconscious; or lately, All God's Chillun Are Toys. The MTV response is easier to dance to: Somewhere in Every Yuppie Soul There Lurks a Little Richard.

There are other variations: After the sexual revolution, Pee-wee Herman's full-frontal infantilism is OK—a soothing diversion, at least, from Rambo's rage. It's not that these visions are simple-minded; nothing is that simple-minded, even in a world bemused by media. They are becoming predictable, not to say evasive.

A haunted nostalgia, sometimes sentimental, sometimes irritable, accompanies most quests for America. Perhaps memory—the genuine article, myth-piercing memory on the order of Marguerite Duras's or Gabriel García Márquez's—is a more strenuous enterprise than spinning stools in the old soda shop. Perhaps the problem is that we don't really feel nostalgic anymore; we just feel empty. Maybe America's memory is MIA.

Byrne, with his art-derived imagination, his instinct for ritual and his snapshot sensibility, picks up on this—on the high-strung simplicity and innocence of hi-tech art; it's the stance he works from.

"Moviemaking is a trick. Songwriting is a trick. When it doesn't work, it's really offensive.

"I'm trying to put my finger on some kind of ethical center. Maybe it's a wish that people look within themselves and find something, make a decision about what is right and what is wrong, and use that to guide them, rather than returning to traditional values, which seems like grabbing ahold of the raft. The characters in *True Stories* are trying to establish a system of values of their own, however nutty they might seem and however much clowning they might do.

"Things don't exist only in the present; they got there somehow. To me, there's a reason, some sort of reason, why things are the way they are. It might be an irrational reason, but that's good enough."

The sweet anxiety Byrne evinces is not just a modish diversion. His trick, his metaphor, seems to be this: We are at the end of the old nineteenth-century brute-force technology, a technology based on blowing things up, whether it's gas in an internal combustion engine or atoms in a bomb. All we really know how to do right is make things go bang. Or thumpity-*THUMP!* But if we manage not to erase ourselves with the old machines, something new is going to happen. Byrne's work may be the brightest banner of this interim art, nervously trying to outlive the century.

☆ ☆ ☆

He enters the restaurant smoothly, a skinny Buddha on casters. His hair is dark, his shirt is white, his cardigan is black, his hat is a creamy Panama. He is a two-tone rainbow, clearly etched, elegant, and mysterious. He has created the most engaging icon of machine-age man since Chaplin roller-skated in *Modern Times* (the Little Guy is still free, even if his freedom is only mimicry of the Machine).

The waitress finds a crush-proof spot for his Panama hat. He signs autographs left-handedly. He sips wine and eats fish and shyly enjoys the fuss. It is clear that there is no better way for David Byrne to be than as a picture of himself.

Against a background of low murmuring lights and the clinking of *nouvelle* cuisine platters, the conversation ricochets: The secret of permanent pleating, according to Karen, was invented by an Italian fabric designer of the twenties, but it's been forgotten. Oh, yes, David has heard of this. Not to mention the prophetic significance of Quonset huts, the cleverness of California wine labels, tips on film festival strategies and the squeezing of fried garlic, test screenings in Seattle ("We encouraged the audience to fill in as many blanks in the multiple choice as they liked," Karen comments); the strangeness of aluminum siding (rather like haddock in paper), the mystifying aspects of screen direction, the difference between European and American urban planning (Byrne illustrates with ovals sketched on a napkin); coffee; favored focal lengths for the camera he carries (55mm and 28mm; he doesn't care for telephotos, for their unreality); Disneyland, robotic animals, and the proliferation of theme parks, in one of which, Karen says, she observed an utterly convincing mechanical cow wearing a dress. She is perplexed about how they got it to fit so well.

"It's in the cut." Byrne's laughter rings just a note shy of Tom Hulce's giggle in *Amadeus*.

The topics continue to stray. He listens like a lens. He chews his news carefully. What he really dines on, voraciously, is eccentricities. He speaks infrequently, because at thirty-four he has achieved that plateau of celebrity importance where listeners might too predictably agree with him.

"We left Scotland when I was two. I don't remember it at all. I grew up in Baltimore at the end of the bus line. We had to move a lot because they kept building highways over where we were living .... Lately I've been moving a lot. After we finished shooting, I was in Los Angeles. Now I'm here and when I finish here I'll probably go back to Los Angeles. Then I'll go somewhere else. Maybe back to New York for a while. It's not like I'm only in each place for a week. I'm in one place long enough. Where is home? I don't know ... I don't know.

"I work most of the time, but that's because I like what I'm doing. I don't separate it from enjoyment. I get stuck when it comes to saying what my job is, I mean filling out IRS forms."

"How about 'designer who makes a song out of what he sees'?" a friend suggests.

"That sounds pretty good. I'll try that one out."

He stands up like a diagram, then silently heads for the door. He is on the sidewalk by the time Karen retrieves his hat and the shoulder bag containing his camera. "You're always *forgetting* something, David." He considers the return of his Panama hat a bonus and wonders aloud why it is called Panama.

Karen chirps, birdlike, leading the way to the car: "Earth to David ... " He peeks around distractedly, " ... Earth to David. We're ready for you."

One wonders.

A collection of Tom McDonough's stories and articles, some of which first appeared in American Film, *will be published early next year by Grove Press.*